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Family-School Partnerships: Creating Essential Connections for Student Success

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Family-School Partnerships: Creating Essential Connections for Student Success

Susan M. Sheridan, Ph.D.

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Why Family-School Partnerships??

“...parents take their child home after professionals complete their services and parents continue providing the care for the larger portion of the child’s waking hours... No matter how skilled professionals are, or how loving parents are, each cannot achieve alone what the two parties, working hand-in-hand, can accomplish together” (Peterson & Cooper, 1989; pp. 229, 208).
There are many ways that families support education....
“And when you find my homework, Mommy, please be sure to fax it right over.”

Or not....
"Dad, can you read?"

"Your mother and I are feeling overwhelmed, so you'll have to bring yourselves up."
What do we Mean by “Partnership?”

- A relationship involving close cooperation between parties having clearly specified and joint rights and responsibilities
- A student-centered philosophy whose goal(s) are to:
  - enhance success for students, and close the achievement gap
  - improve experiences and outcomes for children, including those that are academic, social, emotional, and behavioral in nature

-- Christenson & Sheridan, 2001

Why Family-School Partnerships?
Families and Schools as “Partners”

- Central to the partnership model is a belief in shared responsibility for educating and socializing children -- both families and educators are essential for children’s progress in school.
- Emphasis is on relationships, rather than roles… how families and educators work together to promote the academic and social development of students.

Why Family-School Partnerships?

- There are many systems and settings where children learn.
  - In the US, students spend 91% of their time from birth - 18 outside of school; once in school, they spend 70% of their waking hours outside of school.
- The impact of out-of-school time (e.g., message about schooling, use of time, congruence with school environment) must be acknowledged.
An effective, constructive family-school partnership occurs in an ecological context, with the student at center:

- Students, families and schools are all part of interrelated ecological systems within which a child resides.
- Difficulties occur when there is a mismatch across one or more subsystems.
- Partnership programs and services are focused on forging a more effective match between the needs of an individual student, and strengths of the interfacing home & school systems.
- Main attention is always on the potential benefits and outcomes for students.

**Theoretical Perspective: Ecological-Systems Approach**

- **Microsystem**
- **Mesosystem**
- **Exosystem**
- **Macrosystem**
General Research Findings

In the presence of effective home-school partnerships, *students* have been shown to demonstrate:

- improvement in grades, test scores, attitudes, self-concept, behavior, social skills
- greater study habits and homework completion rates
- more engagement in classroom learning activities
- higher attendance rates and a reduction in suspension rates and discipline problems

Benefits to Students
In the presence of effective home-school partnerships, teachers have been shown to:

- become more proficient in professional activities
- allocate more time to instruction
- become more involved with curriculum
- develop more student-oriented rather than task-oriented activities
- receive higher ratings on teaching performance evaluations by principals
- indicate greater satisfaction with their jobs and request fewer transfers

In the presence of effective home-school partnerships, parents have been shown to:

- demonstrate greater understanding of the work of schools and positive attitudes about school
- report increased contacts and communication with educators, and a desire for more involvement
- improve their communication with their children, report improved parent-child relationships, and develop effective parenting skills
- become more involved in learning activities at home
General Research Findings

In the presence of effective home-school partnerships, schools have been shown to:

- receive higher effectiveness ratings
- implement more successful school programs

The database is generally correlational, and to attribute a causal link between family involvement and educational performance is premature at this time.

Benefits to Schools
General Research Findings

- Parents, regardless of educational level, income status, or ethnic background want their children to be successful in school (Christenson, 1995)
- Across groups, parents want information about how schools function, children’s development/learning, & parents’ roles in supporting their children
- Many parents are uncertain about how to help their children, how to support schooling, and what their role is vis-à-vis education

General Research Findings

- Generalization of school programs occurs more readily when families are involved
- Consultation with teachers alone is effective at promoting school success (Sheridan et al., 1997), but generalization to home occurs only when parents are involved (Sheridan et al., 1990)
- Family process variables (specific things families do) facilitate learning & educational success more than status variables (who families are)
- Social class or family configuration predicts up to 25% of variance in achievement; family process variables predict up to 60% of variance (Kellaghan et al., 1993)
The Importance of Family Process

Family factors associated with achievement:
- School attendance
- Limited TV viewing
- Reading materials in the home (Barton & Coley, 1992)
- Strong, consistent values about education
- Willingness to help children & intervene at school
- Ability to become involved (Mitsomwang & Hawley, 1993)
- Parental educational expectations
- Talking with students about school
- Providing learning materials
- Providing learning opportunities outside of school (Peng & Lee, 1992)

All of these contribute to the “curriculum of the home,” recognizing the critical role of the home as an important context for learning.

What is the “Curriculum of the Home?”

- Emphasis on family influence on child’s academic, motivational, behavioral, and social growth and performance
- Support of the home environment as a learning environment
- Actions, beliefs, communications to the child that support the child’s learning and emerging autonomy
What Makes Up the Curriculum of the Home?

- Home Expectations and Attributions
- Discipline Orientation
- Structure and Learning
- Home-Affective Environment
- Parent Participation and Engagement

Research to Practice: Implications for Intervention...

- School practices are a stronger predictor of parent involvement than parents’ educational level, income status, or ethnic background (Epstein, 1991)
- What schools do to reach out to or involve parents is important
- Families need information about children, school policies & practices, and what they can do to assist their children as learners
Approach

Atmosphere

Actions:
Communicating a tone of partnership through two-way home-school communication and fostering family involvement in learning at home

Successful Learning Experiences & Outcomes for Students

Possible Role of the RT:LB

The “4 As:”

Evaluate your Approach

Model a constructive Attitude

Establish a positive Atmosphere

Put into place partnership Actions
**Approach**

- The framework for interactions with families
- Do we approach families with an understanding (and expectation) that there are shared responsibilities for learning?
- How can that be achieved?

**Atmosphere**

- The affective climate in interactions among families and schools
- The physical climate in schools that make them inviting and “family-friendly”
- What do you already do to create an atmosphere that is family-friendly, open, and inviting?
“Family-type” Atmosphere

Atmosphere

All families must feel welcome!
- Differences in parent backgrounds & experiences must be recognized
- Personal difficulties in school or previous conflicts may be prominent
- Ethnic, linguistic, religious, class differences can widen the gap
Atmosphere

The values and perceptions held about family-school relationships

To what extent do you convey the attitude that:

- All families have strengths
- Parents can learn ways to help their children if they are provided with the opportunity and necessary support
- Parents have important information and perspectives that we need
- Schools and families influence each other
- No one is at “fault” – if a child is not succeeding, the partnership has not been utilized to its potential
Attitudes

- Garner Administrative Support
- Practice Systems Advocacy
- Build Family-School Teams
- Increase Effective Problem Solving and Solution Finding
- Keep a Focus on Goals and Outcomes
- But Recognize the Importance of Process
- Foster Positive Home Learning Environments
- Focus on Communication as the foundation for all family involvement
- Collaboration with families is key!

Actions
Thank You!
For more information, or to follow up, please feel free to contact me at:

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